

THE STANDARD *Bearer* A REFORMED SEMI-MONTHLY MAGAZINE

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Meditation

Intercession

Wherefore I also, after I heard of your faith in the Lord Jesus, and love unto all the saints, cease not to give thanks for you, making mention of you in my prayers; that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give unto you the Spirit of wisdom and revelation in the knowledge of him: the eyes of your understanding being enlightened; that ye may know what is the hope of his calling, and what the riches of the glory of his inheritance in the saints. Eph. 1:15-18.

Striking intercession!

Striking from the viewpoint of the intercessor:
I also!

For the apostle himself is suffering in the flesh. He experiences that it is given him in the cause of Christ, not only to believe on him, but also to suffer in His behalf. For the Word of God and the testimony which he had, he is in bonds in Caesarea. As he writes these words, there is a chain about his wrist. . . .

Might it not be expected, then, that he would be so oppressed by his condition that his own needs were uppermost in his mind, and that he would request the church of Ephesus to intercede for him, to pray for him, to give him grace, or at least for grace that he might be strengthened to bear the cross?

But very remote from his mind are his personal sufferings. No word of complaint escapes his lips. He seemed to be content in whatever state he might be. Earthly things weigh not heavily upon his soul. Nay, for he knows how to rejoice in his sufferings for Christ. It is in behalf of her that his prayer ascends to the throne of grace.

Always! For he ceases not to give thanks and to mention them in his prayers!

Wonderful intercession!

Unspeakable riches!

For these the apostles pray in behalf of the Church.

For those things, he prays, which eye hath not seen, and ear hath not heard, and that have never arisen in the heart of man. Nor could they possibly be seen or heard or arise in man's heart. They are not the proper objects of perception. They do not belong to the world of our earthly experience. They lie beyond our present horizon; on the other side. . . .

Riches of hope and riches of glory unspeakable!

Hence, with a view to these riches, and earnestly longing that the church may lay hold upon them and possess them, the apostle prays that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give them the Spirit of wisdom and revelation in the knowledge of Him, and that thus the eyes of their understanding might be enlightened.

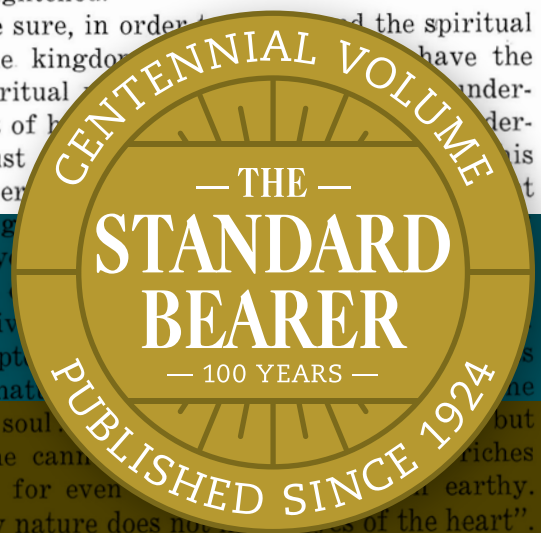
For, to be sure, in order to have the spiritual things of the kingdom, we must have the power of spiritual understanding, not of human understanding, must have spiritual understanding.

from the original "the eyes of y and the light cannot perceive they are adapted eyes of the nat light of his soul.

with these he cannot of salvation, for even a man by nature does not understand the things of the heart". The natural man does not understand the things of the heart. They are spiritually discerned; and they are foolishness to him. Hence, in order to know and to possess the spiritual riches of grace, the eyes of one's heart must be enlightened.

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REFORMED
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Meditation

Rev. John Marcus, pastor of Peace PRC in Dyer, Indiana

Our Savior born of a virgin

And she shall bring forth a son, and thou shalt call his name JESUS: for he shall save his people from their sins. Now all this was done, that it might be fulfilled which was spoken of the Lord by the prophet, saying, Behold, a virgin shall be with child, and shall bring forth a son, and they shall call his name Emmanuel, which being interpreted is, God with us.

Matthew 1:21-23

Jesus Christ, born of a virgin, will certainly save His people from their sins!

The Devil would have us question this truth. The world mocks at it. But, by God's grace, we believe Jesus will save us to the uttermost.

Matthew's gospel account reveals that Jesus is the long-expected King come to save us. He is the King whom God promised would be born in the royal line of David (Matt.1:1, "the son of David"). Not only that, Matthew proves that Jesus was born of a virgin, in direct fulfillment of Isaiah 7:14: "Therefore the Lord himself shall give you a sign; Behold, a virgin shall conceive, and bear a son, and shall call his name Immanuel." The sure fruit of Jesus' virgin birth is our salvation.

Knowing how critical it is to our faith, we should not be surprised that the truth concerning Jesus' virgin birth is scorned and attacked by the world. But Scripture's testimony is clear and unambiguous: "Behold, a virgin shall be with child, and shall bring forth a son." Jesus Christ was miraculously conceived in the virgin Mary's womb.

The Holy Spirit draws our attention to the miraculous nature of Jesus' birth at the beginning of the prophecy: "Behold, a virgin shall be with child." The prophet begins with an interjection, as if to say "Look at this! Here is something remarkable!" What remarkable fact demands our attention? Not that a woman would conceive a child and bear him in the ordinary way known to humankind; but that "a virgin shall be with child, and shall bring forth a son." The word "behold" points to Jesus' miraculous conception and birth.

It is true that the Hebrew word for "virgin" in Isaiah's prophecy can sometimes refer to a young woman who

is not necessarily a virgin (Is. 7:14). But that is not true of the Greek word found in Matthew's account (Matt. 1:23). When Matthew says, "Behold a *virgin* shall be with child," the word he uses can only be applied to a woman who has not known a man in the intimacy of marriage. All by itself, this is enough to establish that Jesus was born of a virgin.

Matthew confirms what is already clear when he adds, "Now the birth of Jesus Christ was on this wise: When as his mother Mary was espoused to Joseph, *before they came together*" (v. 18). Before Joseph and Mary came together in the union that belongs to the husband-wife relationship, Jesus had already been conceived in Mary's womb.

In addition to this testimony, we know that Joseph was not the father by the way he reacted to the news that Mary was pregnant: "Then Joseph her husband, being a just man, and not willing to make her a publick example, was minded to put her away privily" (v. 19). The fact that he wanted to divorce Mary shows he was not the baby's father.

Inspired Matthew explicitly tells us how Jesus came to be in Mary's womb when he says that Mary "was found with child of the Holy Ghost" (v. 18). The angel of the Lord confirms the Holy Spirit's role in verse 20: "But while he thought on these things, behold, the angel of the Lord appeared unto him in a dream, saying, Joseph, thou son of David, fear not to take unto thee Mary thy wife: for that which is conceived in her is of the Holy Ghost." These words indicate the origin of the child in Mary's womb.

Jesus Christ was conceived by the Holy Spirit and born of a virgin. Thanks be to God for revealing this wonder to us!

Why is the virgin birth so important for us to know? Because it manifests "God with us!" Matthew draws attention to this by specifically interpreting the name of the child born of a virgin: "they shall call his name Emmanuel, which being interpreted is, *God with us*" (v. 23).

The prophecy concerning the virgin birth and "God with us" is an encouragement to us, just as it was in

Isaiah's day. To understand the significance of Isaiah's prophecy, it is helpful to look at the original context.

Rezin (king of Syria) and Pekah (king of Israel) had joined forces to fight against Ahaz (king of Judah). In light of this threat, God sent Isaiah to tell Ahaz not to fear. When Ahaz would not believe, Isaiah told him to ask for a sign that would prove the truth of God's promises. When Ahaz refused to ask for a sign, Isaiah responded with a glorious prophecy: "Hear ye now, O house of David; Is it a small thing for you to weary men, but will ye weary my God also? Therefore the Lord himself shall give you a sign; Behold, a virgin shall conceive, and bear a son, and shall call his name Immanuel" (Is. 7:13-14). We know this prophecy concerns Jesus Christ because of what we read in Matthew's gospel account: "Now all this was done, that it might be fulfilled which was spoken of the Lord by the prophet, saying, Behold, a virgin shall be with child" (Matt. 1:22-23).

How would this sign of the virgin birth encourage God's people in Isaiah's day? What does this promise of the coming Messiah have to do with the king of Syria and the king of Israel?

In answer to these questions, we ought to note that these enemies of Judah were, in fact, the enemies of the throne of David, and therefore enemies of the promised Savior who would come from David's line. They wanted to take Ahaz, the descendant of David, off the throne and put their own king on the throne instead: "Let us go up against Judah, and vex it, and let us make a breach therein for us, and set a king in the midst of it, even the son of Tabeal" (Is. 7:6-7). The effect would be to keep the promised Seed of David from coming.

But God's message to Ahaz was clear: "Thus saith the Lord GOD, it shall not stand, neither shall it come to pass" (Is. 7:7). Even though Syria and Israel joined forces against David's house with all their might, it was impossible for them to prevail against God and His King. The virgin birth is a sign of this truth. No matter how many kings of the earth gather together against David's throne, they cannot prevail. The baby born of a virgin is a sign that the enemies of God cannot fulfill their evil schemes. Satan and his servants cannot prevail against the church.

Why will these enemies of the church never prevail?

Because the child born of a virgin is "Emmanuel, which being interpreted is, God with us" (Matt. 1:23). He is "ruler in Israel; whose goings forth have been from of old, from everlasting" (Mic. 5:2). He is the promised Seed who would crush the head of His foe (Gen. 3:15). He is the Seed of Abraham, through whom all the nations of the earth would be blessed (Gen. 22:18). He is the Seed who would sit on David's throne forever (II Sam. 7:13, 16).

He is truly God and He is truly man, able to save us to the uttermost. He is willing and able to save us. He is able to conquer all our enemies. The child born to the virgin is "God with us," the sure foundation of our salvation.

The virgin birth manifests "God with us."

The sure fruit of the virgin birth is our salvation.

That is the message which inspired Matthew proclaims. The message is not merely, "He shall make salvation *possible* for his people." The message is rather: He "*shall save* his people from their sins" (Matt. 1:21).

Jesus was able to purchase our salvation because He was born of a virgin. He is able to save us because He is God the Son come in human flesh, truly God and truly man united in the person of Jesus Christ. The virgin birth

proves that "the word was made flesh, and dwelt among us" (John 1:14). The virgin birth proves that God is with us!

Being "God with us," He shall save His people from their sins. Being truly man, He was able to suffer in our place. Being truly God, He was perfectly righteous and able to sustain the burden of God's wrath against our sins.

Jesus Christ is "God with us!" That is the truth of the virgin birth. He is true God, co-eternal and coequal with the Father and the Holy Spirit. And, He is with us. He is with us in God's eternal counsel as we were chosen in Christ. He was with us in His weakened and suffering human nature. He was with us when He suffered the torments that we deserved. He is with us still by His Spirit.

Do not doubt then. Jesus Christ, born of the virgin will certainly save us from our sins!

Even though Syria and Israel joined forces against David's house with all their might, it was impossible for them to prevail against God and His King. The virgin birth is a sign of this truth. No matter how many kings of the earth gather together against David's throne, they cannot prevail. The baby born of a virgin is a sign that the enemies of God cannot fulfill their evil schemes. Satan and his servants cannot prevail against the church.



Editorial

Prof. Barrett Gritters, professor of Practical Theology in the Protestant Reformed Theological Seminary and member of Hudsonville PRC

When discipline is naive

In the discipline of some gross sins, churches risk error on the one hand by being brutal, on the other hand by being naive. The third mark of the true church—the God-given and powerful tool of discipline that saves sinners, preserves the church, and glorifies God—can be used wrongly. When it becomes brutal, discipline harms the sinner. When it is naive, discipline harms just about everyone. In neither case is discipline exercised properly. In both cases, it might not be discipline at all.

The editorial of December 1 (“When discipline ‘descends into butchery’”) addressed the danger of harming the sinner by being overly rigorous. Here, I address the opposite danger—of being naively lenient. This error endangers the sinner himself as well as everyone around him.

When Reformed Church Order commentaries speak of the *rule* that the sinner “ought to be received upon his testimony in the spirit of Christian love which gladly forgives and is eager to believe,”¹ they do not mean *rule* as an inviolable law with no exceptions. For the law of charity that “believes all things” (I Cor. 13) does not contradict the wisdom of I John 4:1: “Beloved, believe *not* every spirit...” or of Proverbs 18:17: “He that is first in his own cause *seemeth* just.” The rule of Christ that “love covers sin” must not blind one to the depths and deceptions of sin. Thus, VanDellen and Monsma also say, “If, however, the party has sinned repeatedly, or if the offense is very grievous,” the manner of reconciling is not normal. In this case, the sinner “must give proof of his sincerity by a Godly walk.”² That is, there are exceptions to the *rule* of quick reconciliation, and since gross sins of long-standing are exceptional, they must be treated exceptionally. Do not reconcile quickly.

That warning is true even for some of the simpler sins, if we may speak of any sin as simple. “Sins of weakness” as they are sometimes called—like a young man getting drunk on Friday night, or a young woman committing sexual sin—may not be so simple at all. The young man may be quick to “repent,” but he does not want to turn from the patterns of behavior that led

to the Friday night fiasco. The pregnant young woman may be eager to reconcile, but she is unwilling to deal with elders and parents about the lifestyle that led her into the temptation. *Sometimes* a quick reconciliation of sins of weakness is godly wisdom; but sometimes even these may not be so simple.

Especially, however, gross sins of long-standing must not be treated as though repentance is straightforward and quick. A murderous husband with a pattern of violence may not quickly be put back with his wife and children—regardless of his many tears—lest he continue his harmful ways. Sexual perversion’s roots go deep and need to be extracted carefully and completely, lest they re-sprout—both in the deviant and in his children. Alcohol and drugs can take such hold of a man or woman that deliverance takes time and probably acknowledgment of a multitude of other sins. The whole science of addiction has shown that the brain itself reshapes and changes by such emotionally charged repeated actions. Time and effort and not a little wisdom are required in those who help.

Sufficient evidence of repentance

In Article 75, the Church Order therefore requires that the reconciliation of gross sins must take place “upon *sufficient evidence of repentance*....” The *main* purpose of Article 75 is to allow consistories freedom in the *manner* of reconciliation: “in such a manner as the Consistory shall deem conducive to the edification of each Church.” But the parenthetical phrase “(upon sufficient evidence of repentance)” added already in 1581, is essential.

That reconciliation of sinners may not take place without repentance should be obvious. No church may reconcile an impenitent. But the article adds two important elements for the consistory’s consideration: 1) There must be “evidence” of repentance. Evidence is proof that can be *seen*. Just as evidence is required to *place* the sinner under discipline (no one may be convicted without proof of guilt), so evidence is required to *release* the sinner from the bonds of discipline; 2) there must be *sufficient* evidence. In cases of lesser sins, the evidence needed to prove repentance is less. In cases of gross (weighty) sins of long standing, the evidence needed to convince a church of the sinner’s repentance is greater.

1 See VanDellen and Monsma, *The Church Order Commentary*, (RFPA, 2021), 487.

2 *Commentary*, 487.

There must be *repentance*; there must be *evidence* of it; and the evidence must be *sufficient*.

This Church Order mandate is biblical.

Throughout, Scripture teaches that there are two kinds of sorrow—one genuine, the other counterfeit—and elders need to discern the difference. The sorrow that is godly leads to repentance and salvation, in contrast to sorrow that is *worldly* which leads to death (II Cor. 7:10). But how can the elders discern the difference? A man may cry like Esau (Heb. 12:16, 17), or put on sackcloth and walk softly like Ahab (I Kings 21:27), but his tears may be crocodile tears and his sackcloth a sham. He may speak beautiful words about how he feels and what he regrets. He is a churchman after all. But words are not necessarily evidence of repentance.

The wisdom of Proverbs teaches that *confessing* sin is one thing, *forsaking* it is quite another. “He that covereth his sins shall not prosper: but whoso confesseth and forsaketh them shall have mercy.” There may be no mercy for those who do not *forsake*. Commenting on II Corinthians 2:6, Calvin says that the church must be “fully satisfied as to his penitence.”

The Reformed fathers embedded this biblical truth deeply into the creeds by adding adjectives like “true” and “sincere” and adverbs like “godly” to the concepts of repentance and sorrow. The Heidelberg Catechism (Lord’s Day 33) teaches that there is ‘conversion’ and there is *true* conversion. *True* conversion is *sincere* sorrow and *sincere* joy because sorrow and joy can be faked. True conversion is not just hatred of sin but *fleeing* from it; not merely a profession of love for good works but *living* in them. The Lord’s Supper (LD 30) is not for hypocrites—merely ‘sorry’—but for those who are *truly* sorry for their sins. The kingdom’s keys (LD 31) open the doors for those who *sincerely* repent. The Canons of Dordt teach that a fruit of election is *godly* sorrow (I:12), that regeneration brings forth *sincere* obedience (III/IV:16), and that when God renews His own to repentance, He works in them *sincere* sorrow for their sin (V:7).

This is the creedal background of the Church Order’s requirement of “sufficient *evidence* of repentance” before reconciling some sins.

Scripture’s portrait of the true penitent

What does true repentance look like? That really ought not be a hard question to answer, except that sin is so powerful and deceptive. It ought to be very unsettling for elders to wonder whether a person is truly sorrow for their sin or putting on a show. But we can learn to recognize genuine repentance.

The Psalms paint a clear portrait of a truly repentant man. We have learned to recognize a penitent from singing Psalms. “Broken by thy indignation, I am trou-

bled by my sin.” “With my burden of transgression, heavy laden, overborne; humbled low I make confession, for my folly now I mourn.” “Weak and wounded, I implore Thee; Lord to me Thy mercy show...all my trouble Thou dost know.” “My transgressions I confess, grief and guilt my soul oppress; I have sinned against Thy grace.... I confess Thy judgment *just*, speechless I Thy mercy trust.” “Broken, humbled to the dust by Thy wrath and judgment just” (Psalter #s 102, 140). The penitent sinner is *humbled, troubled, weak, wounded, oppressed, and broken*, as he looks not at himself but at his God. Broken! Is it difficult to recognize *brokenness*?

The apostle Paul adds to the portrait of the penitent. When he counseled the Corinthians regarding discipline, he not only called them to discipline the impenitent (I Cor. 5) and then to restore him to their fellowship when he was penitent (II Cor. 2), but he also described what godly sorrow *produced* (II Cor. 7:10, 11). Godly sorrow produces very recognizable fruit. And that helps us distinguish between the repentance of an unbeliever and that of a broken child of God, between counterfeit sorrow and genuine sorrow.

Godly sorrow “wrought in” the church seven fruits (II Cor. 7:11). It *produced* these fruits thoroughly, efficaciously, and inevitably—as thoroughly and inevitably as *sin* produced in Paul all manner of concupiscence (the same word “wrought in” is used in Rom. 7:8 as in II Cor. 7:11). These seven, therefore, may be considered the inspired Paul’s guide for judging penitence.

1) “Carefulness” is haste, earnestness, diligence, which is the opposite of sloth and nonchalance; carefulness as opposed to carelessness.

2) “Clearing of self” is doing whatever is necessary to be without blame, both actually and in the minds of others.

3) “Indignation” is to feel pain and grief; it is to be displeased; it is also to *press hard*. When the disciples hindered children from coming to Jesus, He was indignant: pained, very displeased and pressed hard on the disciples. The truly penitent are hard on themselves because they are very displeased with themselves.

4) “Fear” is apprehension of God’s judgment, or fear of doing wrong, or fear of oneself, and maybe all three.

5) “Vehement desire” is intense longing, the kind of longing a baby expresses when thirsty for mother’s milk and a deer feels for water after a chase. So intense is the penitent sinner in his desires to do right.

6) “Zeal” is a fire that burns in a person. A fire burned in Paul to persecute the church. A fire burned in Jesus to cleanse His holy house. A fire to turn will burn in the penitent.

7) “Revenge” is harder to explain, and “revenge” is probably not the right translation. The idea of “justice” is

in the word. It is a determination to *exercise* justice in every way—upon the sinner and for those damaged by the sin. Or it is a determination to *live* justly in everything.

Then see how Paul prefaces all seven with “what!” What carefulness! What indignation! What vehement desire! Not, “just enough fear!” But “how much fear!” You get the impression Paul sees the cup of sorrow overflowing. He is exclaiming abundance, not paltriness; excess, not just enough; he sees maximum, not minimum. The question for elders then should never be: “Is there enough?” Would God they were able to exclaim: “What indignation! How much grief! His sorrow overflows! Her zeal knows no bounds!”

A caveat is needed here. Elders may be cautioned not to become overzealous here. And members hurt by another’s sin may be tempted to use Paul in such a way that they become guilty of “butchery,” as Calvin put it. Paul presents the ideal. Not everyone, even those who are truly penitent, will reach this ideal. Balance, balance, balance.

A checklist?

Considering this testimony from Scripture, elders may have their own checklists (or guide) for judging the penitence of gross sins. The following, which is intended to be the implications of the Scripture passages, is not intended to be a mechanical list, a complete list, or even a list each of which items applies to every case, but rather considerations for elders when they ask, “Is there sufficient evidence of repentance here?”

- **God-directed sorrow.** Not self-pity, but grief that is turned Godward (II Cor. 7:10).
- **Admission of personal guilt.** It does not excuse, explain, minimize, or blame others. David did not blame Bathsheba for bathing in his sight. “I have sinned. I am the man” (II Sam. 12:7, 13).
- **Voluntary admission of all wrong.** True penitence is not admission of only what can be proved, but a willingness to confess *everything*, soon. (This is the “carefulness” and “zeal” of II Cor. 7:11). “I don’t remember” is a bad sign.
- **Willingness to make deep changes.** A penitent will not want superficial change, but radical change. Of occupation? Of friends? By being accountable to others? At times, this is what is necessary. At times, it may be a desire to reconstruct one’s entire life (II Cor. 5:17).
- **Willingness to endure great pain.** True conversion is mortifying our old self, dying to self. Not unlike a root-canal without anesthesia. True conversion may be that painful. But true penitents are hard on themselves (cf. “indignation” in II Cor. 7. See also Rom. 8:13; Col. 3:5).
- **Proper attitude toward the consistory.** He does what they ask and is patient with their time line. A penitent

is not critical. He bears with their weaknesses and does not use them as excuses for belligerence (Heb. 13:17).

- **Prompt execution of the elders’ advice.** Does not wait till the hour before the next meeting (“Carefulness, zeal, vehement desire” of II Cor. 7:11).
- **Willingness to right wrongs, remedy damages, make amends.** (Ex. 22:1; Lev. 6:4, e.g. See “revenge” in II Cor. 7:11).
- **Willingness to initiate remedies and acts of repentance.** This is the opposite of waiting for the elders to initiate everything (“vehement desire” of II Cor. 2:11).
- **Proper attitude towards those whom he/she damaged.** A penitent does not make demands on his/her family. He is humble, patient, willing to grow in his understanding of the damage he caused. She recognizes that there may be time between being forgiven and being trusted, and then more time before reconciliation may take place. He knows that he has lost the right to set the terms or pace of restoration.

Conclusions

Let me first conclude with a caution for us who are members in a church where discipline is taking place. Be very cautious about making quick judgments in any particular case that the elders are either “lenient” or “brutal.” Likely we have very limited information, which may incline us to conclude wrongly. As believers, we do have the right to question the judgment of the consistory, but always and only with utmost care and respect. I will begin with trust, not skepticism. I will assume that they have made a proper judgment until I am certain that they have not. And if I do begin to judge differently, I will speak to no one else about it, but speak to the elders with humility and a good deal of questions rather than accusations.

Then, once more, to our brother elders: As God’s representatives, you are horrified not only at the error of brutality, but also of naive leniency when it comes to discipline. May God train your hearts and minds to be discerning: for the sake of the sinner whose insincere sorrow will lead him to ruin, for the sake of his family who may be further damaged, and for the sake of the church which must not be leavened by his sin.

The God of wisdom gives wisdom to those who ask and does not reproach them for asking (James 1:5). In these evil days, when God is requiring you to dig through the walls and see abominations our fathers never would have imagined (Ezek. 8), when you elders are seeing sins that horrify you and humble us all, may God give you mountains of wisdom.

Remember, that through your careful work God may be pleased to grant repentance to the sinner ensnared by the evil one (II Tim. 2:25). That is a wonderful goal to pray for.

The blessing of the Lord be upon you; we bless you in the name of the Lord (Ps. 129).



All around us

Rev. David Noorman, pastor of Southwest PRC in Wyoming, Michigan

Manipur, India: A sister of Smyrna

“And unto the angel of the church in Smyrna write; These things saith the first and the last, which was dead, and is alive; I know thy works, and tribulation, and poverty, (but thou art rich) and I know the blasphemy of them which say they are Jews, and are not, but are the synagogue of Satan. Fear none of those things which thou shalt suffer: behold, the devil shall cast some of you into prison, that ye may be tried; and ye shall have tribulation ten days: be thou faithful unto death, and I will give thee a crown of life. He that hath an ear, let him hear what the Spirit saith unto the churches; he that overcometh shall not be hurt of the second death.”

Revelation 2:8-11

Of the seven churches addressed in the book of Revelation, Smyrna stands out for her faithfulness in the midst of tribulation. The church in Smyrna suffered for her confession of the name of Christ, and by the letter of Revelation 2, Christ remembered and encouraged her in that affliction.

In the United States today, the tribulation and poverty of Smyrna is foreign to us, but in other places in the world God’s people suffer grievously for Christ’s sake. These persecuted congregations around the world and in every age are the sisters of Smyrna: they share a similar trial, tribulation, and earthly poverty, but they also share great spiritual riches in Christ and hope of life eternal.

One instance of severe persecution in the world today has been unfolding for several months now in Manipur, India. Manipur is just one of the sisters of Smyrna; there are many more in the world, from Mexico to Myanmar. Considering this present affliction should move us to pray for our persecuted brothers and sisters, and prepare us for the persecution we may someday be called to endure.

The persecution in Manipur

Manipur is the state in the extreme northeast of India, near the border of Myanmar. Since May, Manipur has been embroiled in violent ethnic and religious conflict, including widespread, severe, and deadly persecution of Christians. Violence is still being reported as of the writing of this article, in November.

There are both ethnic and religious undertones to this violence. Hinduism is the majority religion in India, and radical Hindus promote the sentiment that Christians (and

other minority religions) are anti-national, and ought not have a claim to the land and benefits of India. In Manipur, a tribal people known as the Kuki-Zo (also known as the Kukis) live in the mountains of Manipur and are predominantly Christian. On the other side are the Meitei, who live in the plains and are predominantly Hindu.

Some Kuki-zo Christians enjoy special tribal benefits on reservations in Manipur, and this has been occasion for jealousy and violence perpetrated by Meitei Hindus. Adding to the complexity of this conflict, as *Christianity Today* recently reported, there are Meitei Christians caught in the middle, whose plight is being overlooked by both sides.¹ So while the main lines of the conflict appear to be ethnic, the common denominator in all of this violence is a hostility toward Christians no matter what their tribe or tongue.

The reports detailing the violence in Manipur are heart-breaking.² Christians have been attacked and killed. Heavy machinery is used to target and demolish Christian homes, businesses, and churches, leading thousands to forsake their homes and possessions and find refuge elsewhere. Videos of violence against women have gone viral. Who knows what other atrocities take place in the darkness, unwitnessed and unreported?

An August 14 report from *Open Doors* gives a disturbing summary:

Since the violence broke out, more than 120 Christians have been killed, whilst 4,500 buildings and homes belonging to Christians, together with some 400 churches, have been destroyed. Around 50,000 believers have been displaced. Christians on both sides of the clash have been disproportionately targeted, according to local Open Doors experts.³

The PRCA and her sister churches have contacts and friends in two different regions of India. Vellore in the south (contacts of Georgetown PRC) and Kolkata in the northeast (a mission field of Covenant ERC in Singapore), which is close to Manipur. Some of these contacts

1 <https://www.christianitytoday.com/news/2023/november/meitei-christians-kuki-manipur-violence-india-persecution.html>.

2 <https://www.opendoorsuk.org/news/latest-news/manipur-violence>.

3 <https://www.opendoorsuk.org/news/latest-news/manipur-violence>.

report that the media have underestimated the casualties, and that reports from the ground are that thousands, not hundreds, of Christians have died in Manipur.

The conflict and violence in Manipur is a serious concern to our friends in India for a couple of reasons. First, Christians in Manipur have been forced to flee and find refuge in other places in India. Our friends desire to aid and assist these refugees as much as possible. Since the need is greater than they can bear, they have sought help from the PRCA. Look for opportunities in your local congregation to contribute to causes like this.

Second, the turmoil and persecution in Manipur reveal the precarious situation for Christians in India as a whole. Hostility toward Christians was already common in India, and the situation in Manipur represents a progression of scale and intensity. Radical Hinduism leaves no place for Christians in India, and that sentiment is used as a license to persecute Christians. Furthermore, it is not unusual for the government to turn a blind eye to violence against Christians. The outlook for Christians in India, from an earthly point of view, is dire. Come quickly, Lord Jesus!

Thanks be to God that these brethren in India stand ready to extend the hospitality and mercies of Christ to these persecuted Christians! Thanks be to God also for the opportunity we have to assist through Christian giving and fervent prayer! And above all, thanks be to God for the grace that preserves these persecuted Christians in faith, hope, and love!

A letter to the persecuted

The inspired letter to the angel of the church in Smyrna (Rev. 2:8-11) is a treasure for believers in dire circumstances like in Manipur. There is nothing sweeter or more comforting than a word from the Lord Jesus who loves us, and gave Himself for us—the first and the last, who was dead, and is alive!

Jesus first assures the church in Smyrna (and all her sisters) that He knows their works, and their tribulation, and their poverty. The whole world could be ignorant of their horrifying experience, but the Lord writes, “I know.” He knows because He is God, the first and the last, who knows all His works from the beginning of the world. He understands personally and experientially, for He became poor for our sakes and had no place to lay His own head. Our sympathetic Savior is with us through every trial, and will supply our every need! Surely persecuted saints wonder at times if anyone knows their plight; the Lord knows!

He also knows the blasphemy of those who persecute them! All their wickedness may be ignored by the earthly powers. The synagogues of Satan may find favor un-

der the sun. But, the Lord sees, knows, and shall bring every work into judgment. “He shall judge the poor of the people, he shall save the children of the needy, and shall break in pieces the oppressor” (Ps. 72:4).

How precious is that reminder: “But ye are rich!” Losing homes, losing businesses, losing churches, losing everything. Yet for all that external poverty, ye are rich spiritually! You have treasures that cannot be touched by moth or rust, which cannot be stolen or destroyed. You have all the riches of salvation in Christ, even righteousness and the hope of eternal life.

How blessed is that encouragement, “Fear not!” The Lord knew that Smyrna would suffer more. They would be cast into prison by the Devil, enduring tribulation ten days, and may be called to suffer unto death! For all that, they are told, “Fear none of those things.” So also, the persecuted church today may be encouraged. There is nothing to fear, when all things are under the rule of our Savior and Head. There is reason to rejoice, for these tribulations serve God’s purpose of trying and preparing us for our eternal dwelling place.

How wonderful is this promise to faithful martyrs: “I will give thee a crown of life!” Faithfulness is our highest and most costly calling, for the faithful may be mocked, reviled, persecuted, put in bonds, and slain for confessing the name of Jesus. But none of these things move the faithful—not even death. Their eyes are set upon that crown of life, which is given to victors, who overcome in the name of the Lord! They shall not be hurt of the second death, but shall enjoy life eternal!

All these things are addressed to the “angel” of the church in Smyrna, which refers to the messenger or minister of this gospel in that place. Through the angel of Smyrna, these blessed promises and encouragements were passed on to the suffering believers. May the same be done through the “angels” that we know in Vellore, and Kolkata, and many more that we may never meet in this life! I have been told our friends have several Christian contacts in and around Manipur and are making plans to give aid and encouragement, the Lord willing. Pray that God will preserve and prosper all His “angels” who serve the persecuted and suffer persecution themselves.

How easy it is to forget that suffering for Christ’s sake is a gracious gift (Phil. 1:29)! When the Lord sends tribulation and persecution upon us, we should not think it strange but give thanks. We need not despair, but rejoice that we are counted worthy of the kingdom of God. We ought not fear, but be faithful and hopeful. And until we are privileged to suffer in this way, let us not be forgetful of the suffering sisters of Smyrna—fellow members of the body of Christ. “Whether one member suffer, all the members suffer with it” (I Cor. 12:26).



Search the Scriptures

Rev. Ronald Hanko, minister emeritus in the Protestant Reformed Churches and member of Covenant of Grace PR Fellowship in Spokane, Washington

Habakkuk: The just shall live by faith (15)

God's judgment and salvation (5)

Thou wentest forth for the salvation of thy people, even for salvation with thine anointed; thou woundedst the head out of the house of the wicked, by discovering the foundation unto the neck. Selah. Thou didst strike through with his staves the head of his villages: they came out as a whirlwind to scatter me: their rejoicing was as to devour the poor secretly. Thou didst walk through the sea with thine horses, through the heap of great waters. When I heard, my belly trembled; my lips quivered at the voice: rottenness entered into my bones, and I trembled in myself, that I might rest in the day of trouble: when he cometh up unto the people, he will invade them with his troops.

Habakkuk 3:13-16

In Habakkuk 3:13b-16, Habakkuk looks once more to the past, describing events from the conquest of Canaan and from the deliverance at the Red Sea. Verses 13b and 14 describe the conquest: “thou woundedst the head out of the house of the wicked, by discovering the foundation unto the neck. Selah. Thou didst strike through with his staves the head of his villages: they came out as a whirlwind to scatter me: their rejoicing was as to devour the poor secretly.” Verse 15 graphically describes Israel’s passage through the Red Sea (and probably also the Jordan River): “Thou didst walk through the sea with thine horses, through the heap of great waters.”

Having built up to the climax of verse 13a and the promise of Christ’s coming as God’s Anointed, Habakkuk goes back to past events. He sees the wicked nations of Canaan as one man, sees them in the person of their head, who is the opposite of the Lord’s Anointed. That head of the wicked is wounded and in being wounded, the whole body of the wicked is wounded from the foundation (probably a reference to the feet and legs) to the neck.

One thinks in connection with verse 13b not only of Joshua’s victories, but of the description of the beast and its wound in Revelation 13:3, of the beast’s power and dominion and of his ultimate destruction, described in

Revelation 19:19, 20, by Him who is called Faithful and True. Because God’s ways are everlasting (Hab. 3:6), all the events of Israel’s past history, the coming of Babylon in Habakkuk’s days, the crucifixion of Christ and the events of the end, are really all essentially the same; one story with one theme: God in Christ bringing salvation through judgment.

Indeed, verse 14 pictures the destruction of the ungodly not only as God’s work but as their own work. God strikes through, with their own staves, their head. They come always to scatter God’s people and to devour the poor, though in reality they come against God Himself: “they came out as a whirlwind to scatter me,” God says, but He turns their enmity upon them. Psalm 9:15 echoes Habakkuk, “The heathen are sunk down in the pit that they made: in the net which they hid is their own foot taken.” This happens when their own wickedness is visited on them by God, and when God turns their purposes against them.

Having alluded to the Red Sea twice before in verses 8 and 10, Habakkuk 3:15 is another wonderful description of the passage through the Red Sea. Like the dust raised by the passage of a warhorse, so the waters of the Red Sea gathered behind God. Does Habakkuk mean that those horses and chariots of salvation, the angelic hosts, were instrumental in Israel’s passage through the sea? He probably does, though that is not on the foreground of what he says. God Himself is Israel’s Deliverer.

Habakkuk speaks of the Red Sea once again because it was the greatest of all the deliverances of the Old Testament. The exile to and return from Babylon would be a deliverance on the same scale, as Isaiah points out:

But now thus saith the LORD that created thee, O Jacob, and he that formed thee, O Israel, Fear not: for I have redeemed thee, I have called thee by thy name; thou art mine. When thou passest through the waters, I will be with thee; and through the rivers, they shall not overflow thee: when thou walkest through the fire, thou shalt not be burned; neither shall the flame kindle upon thee. For I am the LORD thy God, the Holy One of Israel, thy Saviour: I gave Egypt for thy ransom, Ethiopia and Seba for thee. Since thou wast precious in

my sight, thou hast been honourable, and I have loved thee: therefore will I give men for thee, and people for thy life. Fear not: for I am with thee: I will bring thy seed from the east, and gather thee from the west; I will say to the north, Give up; and to the south, Keep not back: bring my sons from far, and my daughters from the ends of the earth; even every one that is called by my name: for I have created him for my glory, I have formed him; yea, I have made him (43:1-7).

All this history reminds us why much of the Old Testament, as well as the gospel accounts are history, and why the details of Old and New Testament history are important. If the details of Bible history do not matter as some suggest, where would that have left Habakkuk and Judah? If the miraculous in those accounts is questionable, where would Habakkuk and Judah have turned in their need? Habakkuk finds his and Judah's consolation in the details of past history and especially in the miraculous: in the passage through the Red Sea, in the giving of the law at Sinai, in the parting of the Jordan River, in the battles for the conquest of Canaan, battles in which the Israelites had to do almost nothing, in Joshua's victory over the Canaanites and the standing still of sun and moon, and in Deborah and Barak's victory over Sisera, when the stars in their courses and the River Kishon fought for Israel.

Those details of Bible history should be known by us and be important to us, too. They are not only the details of God's presence among His people, His judgments of their enemies and His faithfulness to them, but they are prophetic of events still to happen before the end of the world. Where, then, do we find our consolation and peace if we do not find it where Habakkuk did, in the inspired and infallible record of God's dealings with His people.

Lloyd-Jones puts it well:

If God did not actually do the things recorded in the Old Testament for Israel, then the whole Bible may be just a piece of psychology meant to keep me happy. The Bible, however, plainly shows that my comfort and consolation lie in facts—the fact that God has done certain things and that they have literally happened. The God in whom I believe is the God who could and *did* divide the Red Sea and the River Jordan. In reminding himself and us of these things Habakkuk is not just comforting himself by playing with ideas; he is speaking of the things that God has *actually done*. The Christian faith is solidly based upon facts not ideas. And, if the facts recorded in the Bible are not true, then I have no hope and no comfort.¹

What Habakkuk recollects as he thinks of Israel's

past history did not calm his fears (v. 16). We would say, “his belly was in knots, he could hardly speak, his limbs were like jelly and he couldn't stop shaking.” His remembrance of past events only increased his fears, for those past events included the slaughter at Sinai, the fire and the plague at Kibroth and Kadesh, the sudden disappearance of the rebels at Kadesh, the forty years of wandering, the fiery serpents in the wilderness of Edom, the shocking defeat at Ai. Thinking of those things only served to remind him that the Babylonians were coming. That is the point of verse 16b: “when he cometh up unto the people, he will invade them with his troops.” Whether “he” is the King of Babylon or God Himself really makes no difference. What God had said about Babylon would come to pass. It was the will of God and it was terrifying.

There is no need to think ill of Habakkuk and his fears. He is no different from us, who though we know God's promises and faithfulness, nevertheless tremble when we think of the end times and of persecution. Jesus, though He knew that God would not leave His soul in hell, sweat great drops of blood in the garden and confessed that His soul was troubled as His hour approached. Truly God's people are “troubled on every side, yet not distressed; we are perplexed, but not in despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; cast down, but not destroyed” (II Cor. 4:8, 9).

They ought not be afraid. Habakkuk's prophecy tells them why. Robertson explains:

Often God's people find themselves severely disturbed because they see no visible power as strong as their enemies. But the prophecy of Habakkuk encourages the faithful to assume a strange perspective. They must look at the strength of the enemy as the very source of their own protection. The stronger the enemy, the more sure its own self-destruction. For as God sovereignly raises up powers and brings them down again, He turns the strength of the enemy against itself. Haman hangs on his own gallows (Esth. 7:10). Daniel's adversaries perish in the very den of lions into which they had cast him (Dan. 6:25 [Eng. 24]). He who digs a pit to entrap the righteous falls into the same ditch that he has made (Ps. 7:6 [Eng. 5]). Abimelech and Shechem, conspiring rebels in the days of the Judges are cursed with the curse of self-destruction (Judg. 9:19-20). Facing a mighty coalition of enemy nations, Judah under Jehoshaphat must stand still and see the salvation of the Lord (2 Chron. 20:17). When God's people look across the wilderness, they see a vast array of the corpses of their enemies, for the Lord had set them against one another (2 Chron. 20:24). Characteristic of the last great conflict will be a warfare in which each of the Lord's enemies will eat the flesh of his own arm (Isa. 9:19 [Eng. 20]; cf. Ezek. 8:21; Zech. 14:13). Rather than being terrified

1 D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *From Fear to Faith: Studies in the Book of Habakkuk* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1982), 73.

at the strength of their enemies, God's people ought to rest confidently in the assurance that the strength of the enemies' power only displays their capacity to destroy themselves."²

Habakkuk has come full circle. He is still fearful but no longer questioning. His questions were not all answered, but in faith he receives the wonderful truth, that justified in Christ Jesus, the coming Messiah, God will continue to be the God of His people even in the worst of circumstances and will wonderfully and mysteriously use even those worst circumstances for their good. He is God, sovereign and unchangeable, the God who keeps covenant forever.

Habakkuk better understands God's ways, too. In the light of past events he sees much more clearly that God works all things for good. That though He uses the nations to chastise His people, it is the nations and not His people who come under His destroying wrath. His people, through those judgments, are saved, now and forever.

Did not Habakkuk already know these things? His prophecy shows that he did, but like us, he did not remember them when he needed to do so, and it was God's answer to him that reminded him of the wonderful works of God. We have his prophecy and the rest of Scripture to remind us.

Four things are emphasized in this closing chapter of Habakkuk. First, God has proved Himself throughout history to be the faithful covenant God of His people; second, He is able to do all things, and is therefore able to make all things work for their salvation; third, He always keeps His word (v. 9); and, four, He always punishes and destroys the enemies of His people and delivers them.

And so Habakkuk comes to his wonderful conclusion: "Although the fig tree shall not blossom, neither shall fruit be in the vines; the labour of the olive shall fail, and the fields shall yield no meat; the flock shall be cut off from the fold, and there shall be no herd in the stalls: Yet I will rejoice in the LORD, I will joy in the God of my salvation. The LORD God is my strength, and he will make my feet like hinds' feet, and he will make me to walk upon mine high places" (3:17-19). That we look at next time.

We are able to look back and add to the story of God's wonderful works. We know now that the Babylonians did come, destroying temple and city and removing the people to Babylon. We know that God preserved His people in Babylon and kept His word,

bringing them back after seventy years and visiting Babylon in His just wrath as He had said. We know how, at the most hopeless moment in history when God's enemies condemned and crucified His Son, that God raised Him from the dead, spoiling principalities and powers, triumphing over them in it (Col. 2:15). We have the record of the way in which through persecution God brought about the spread of the gospel to the nations and planted His church in every land. We can look back and see how God kept His church safe through the desperate times of the Middle Ages and the domination of Roman Catholicism, and brought about the great Protestant Reformation, bringing His people once again out of bondage and giving them deliverance from their enemies.

Knowing the story as it continues today, we can be sure that when Babylon comes again and God's people suffer as never before in history, that God will remember His word, will keep the oaths of the tribes, will remain faithful to His covenant, will come again, His bow made quite naked, His glittering spear shining, His arrows sharp in the hearts of His enemies. And when He does, the sun and moon will once again stand still in their habitations and the deeps will shout and throw up their hands at His coming. He will thresh the heathen in His anger and will measure the earth, driving asunder the nations and scattering the everlasting mountains in order to make a place for His people, a place where "The enemy shall not exact upon him; nor the son of wickedness afflict him" (Ps. 89:22). He will come with His Anointed for the salvation of His people.

Rebuked are the nations, the wicked destroyed,
Their memory perished, their dwellingplace void;
Enthroned and eternal, Jehovah shall reign,
The peoples to judge and the right to maintain.

Thou, Lord, art a refuge for all the oppressed;
All trust Thee who know Thee, and trusting are blest;
For never, O Lord, did Thy mercy forsake
The soul that has sought of Thy grace to partake.

Give praise to Jehovah, the mighty deeds tell
Of Him Who has chosen in Zion to dwell,
Of Him to Whom justice and vengeance belong,
Who visits the lowly and overthrows wrong.

Behold my affliction, Thy mercy accord,
And back from death's portals restore me, O Lord,
That I in the gates of Thy Zion may raise
My song of salvation and show forth Thy praise.³

2 O. Palmer Robertson, *The Books of Nahum, Habakkuk and Zephaniah* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1990), 240.

3 Psalter No. 16, stanzas 3-6 (Ps. 9).



Believing and confessing

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Of Jesus Christ, true God and man, the only Savior of the world (Second Helvetic Confession, 11f)

Previous article in this series: May 1, 2023, p. 246.

Christ Is Truly Risen from the Dead.

We believe and teach that the same Jesus Christ our Lord, in His true flesh in which He was crucified and died, rose again from the dead, and that not another flesh was raised other than the one buried, or that a spirit was taken up instead of the flesh, but that He retained His true body. Therefore, while His disciples thought they saw the spirit of the Lord, He showed them His hands and feet which were marked by the prints of the nails and wounds, and added: “See my hands and my feet, that it is I myself; handle me, and see, for a spirit has not flesh and bones as you see that I have” (Luke 24:39).

Jesus is risen! He who was dead is alive—alive forever more! “I am he that liveth, and was dead; and, behold, I am alive for evermore, Amen! (Rev. 1:18).

Glorious resurrection gospel: “Why seek ye the living among the dead? He is not here, but is risen” (Luke 24:5b-6a). Demonstration of His deity, inasmuch as He has power over death: “And declared to be the Son of God with power...by the resurrection from the dead.” Heart of the apostolic preaching: Paul “reasoned with them out of the scriptures, opening and alleging, that Christ must needs have suffered, and risen again from the dead” (Acts 17:2b-3a). Seal of our justification: “Who was delivered for our offences, and was raised again for our justification” (Rom. 4:25). Ground of our assurance: “Who is he that condemneth? It is Christ that died, yea rather, that is risen again, who is even at the right hand of God, who also maketh intercession for us” (Rom. 8:34). Basis for the certainty of our resurrection: “For if we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so them also which sleep in Jesus will God bring with him” (I Thess. 4:14). Firstfruits of the glorified saints: “But now is Christ risen from the dead, and become the firstfruits of them that slept” (I Cor. 15:20).

The Second Helvetic Confession (SHC) does what the Heidelberg Catechism does not do. The Heidelberg

Catechism has only one question and answer devoted to explaining the fifth article of the Apostles’ Creed, “The third day He rose again from the dead.” Although Q&A 45 assumes the fact of Jesus’ resurrection, its focus is on the benefit of the resurrection for believers.

Q. 45. What doth the resurrection of Christ profit us?

A. First, by His resurrection He has overcome death, that He might make us partakers of that righteousness which He had purchased for us by His death; secondly, we are also by His power raised up to a new life; and lastly, the resurrection of Christ is a sure pledge of our blessed resurrection.

There can be no question that the profit of Christ’s resurrection depends on the reality of His resurrection. Nevertheless, the Heidelberg Catechism takes the bodily resurrection of our Lord on the third day for granted. It is a given—an indisputable assumption of faith. The Heidelberg Catechism does not have a question like, “Did Christ rise from the dead?” or, “What was Christ’s resurrection from the dead?”

It is not a weakness that the Heidelberg Catechism does not establish the fact of Christ’s resurrection. Among professing Christians at the time of the Reformation, there was no question about the Lord’s resurrection. Reformed and Lutherans, Anabaptists and Roman Catholics confessed the bodily resurrection of the Savior. From that point of view, there was no compelling need to establish the historicity of Jesus’ resurrection.

That was then. Things are quite different in our day. According to Lifeway Research, one-third of professing Christians in the United States do not believe in the bodily resurrection of Jesus. Matters are worse in Great Britain. A BBC News poll indicated that two-thirds of professing Christians in Britain do not believe the biblical account of a literal resurrection of Christ from the dead.

One of the most well-known liberals of the twentieth century, Rev. Harry Emerson Fosdick (1878-1969), rejected the bodily resurrection of Jesus. He viewed Je-

Jesus' resurrection as a "persistence in [Jesus'] personality" among His disciples after His death. Jesus survived death in the sense that even after He died His teachings were championed by His disciples.

The Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. (1929-1968), was a Baptist minister and famed leader of the American civil rights movement. He, too, denied the reality of Jesus' bodily resurrection. King taught that the devotion of His disciples led to their belief in Jesus' resurrection. "They had been captured by the magnetic power of his personality," he contended. "This basic experience led to the faith that he could never die."¹ Thus, the bodily resurrection of Jesus is simply a reflection of early Christian experience, not an actual, verifiable miraculous occurrence in time and history.

Denial of Jesus' resurrection is nothing new, of course. In Matthew 28:11-15, we learn that the soldiers who guarded the tomb of Jesus, after they had recovered from having fallen down as dead men at the appearance of the angel, came into Jerusalem and reported all that had happened to the chief priests. After being given a bribe, "hush money," the soldiers agreed to tell the lie that Jesus' disciples had come by night, while they slept, and stolen Jesus' body. A preposterous lie, for, if they were sleeping, how did they know that it was Jesus' disciples who had stolen Jesus' body. But unbelief goes to ridiculous extremes to deny the truth.

The SHC affirms the literal, bodily resurrection of Jesus. He arose "in His true flesh in which He was crucified" and "not another flesh was raised other than the one buried." Bullinger quotes Jesus' word to His disciples, who supposed that they saw "the spirit of the Lord:" "See my hands and my feet, that it is I myself; handle me, and see, for a spirit has not flesh and bones as you see that I have" (Luke 24:39).

"We believe and teach" the resurrection of Jesus on the third day.

Christ Is Truly Ascended into Heaven.

We believe that our Lord Jesus Christ, in His same flesh, ascended above all visible heavens into the highest heaven, that is, the dwelling-place of God and the blessed ones, at the right hand of God the Father. Although it signifies an equal participation in glory and majesty, it is also taken to be a certain place about which the Lord, speaking in the Gospel, says: "I go to prepare a place for you" (John 14:2). The apostle Peter also says: "Heaven must receive Christ unto the time of restoring all things (Acts 3:21). And

from heaven the same Christ will return in judgment, when wickedness will then be at its greatest in the world and when the Antichrist, having corrupted true religion, will fill up all things with superstition and impiety and will cruelly lay waste the Church with bloodshed and flames (Dan., ch. 11). But Christ will come again to claim His own, and by His coming to destroy the Antichrist, and to judge the living and the dead (Acts 17:31). For the dead will rise again (I Thess. 4:14 ff.), and those who on that day (which is unknown to all creatures [Mark 13:32]) will be alive, will be changed "in the twinkling of an eye," and all the faithful will be caught up to meet Christ in the air, so that then they may enter with Him into the blessed dwelling-places to live forever (I Cor. 15:51f.). But the unbelievers and ungodly will descend with the devils into hell to burn forever and never to be redeemed from torments (Matt. 25:46).

In this paragraph, the SHC combines the truth of Christ's ascension into heaven and His second coming—His return from heaven for His own at the end of the world. Christ's ascension into heaven means that heaven is to be "taken to be a certain [real] place." Although it is a spiritual dwelling place, it is a real place. As a real place, it is the abode of God, the angels, and the saints who have died, "the blessed ones," as they are referred to in this paragraph. Into this place, Jesus has ascended. With the body with which He was raised, He has been exalted. In the same body with which He came forth from the grave, He now dwells in heaven.

Not only is Christ ascended into heaven, but in heaven He occupies the position of highest possible glory, above the exalted saints and the holy angels. For, in heaven, Jesus is exalted "at the right hand of God the Father." As the one who was exalted to the king's right hand in Bible times occupied the highest position in the realm, second only to the king himself, so Jesus Christ is exalted to the right hand of God the Father. He is, if you will, God's right-hand man.

As the ascended Christ, Jesus is God's vicar, the representative of God who exercises all of the power of God Himself in the name of and on behalf of the almighty God. Not only does the ascension "signify an equal participation in [God's] glory and majesty," but the ascension means that Christ rules. He is not a figurehead monarch, but a real ruler, as Christ said at the time of His ascension, "All power is given unto me in heaven and in earth," (Matt. 28:18). According to Psalm 110:1, God says to Jesus Christ in the ascension, "Sit thou at my right hand, until I make thine enemies thy footstool." The writer of the epistle to the Hebrews teaches that in the ascension God says to His Son, "Thy throne, O God, is

¹ Consult the webpage: theconversation.com/how-baptists-hold-differing-views-on-the-resurrection-of-christ-and-why-this-matters-158572.

for ever and ever: a scepter of righteousness is the scepter of thy kingdom,” (Heb. 1:8). A scepter is the symbol and instrument of rule. Christ rules, executing God’s counsel and causing God’s will to come to pass.

From heaven, the exalted Lord Jesus Christ will come again at the end of the world. This paragraph of the SHC is significant not only for its teaching regarding Christ’s ascension, but also for its teaching concerning Christ’s second coming. It is significant because it sets forth the Reformation view of the second coming of Jesus Christ. It makes plain that the historic Reformed view of the second coming of Christ is amillennial, not postmillennial as some attempt to argue. The SHC states unequivocally that Christ will come again in judgment “when wickedness will then be at its greatest in the world and when the Antichrist, having corrupted true religion, will fill up all things with superstition and impiety and will cruelly lay waste the Church with bloodshed and flames.”

There is no room, so far as the SHC is concerned, for the view that either through political activism or the influence of the gospel the world is going to become better and better and an age of peace and prosperity—a literal millennium—is going to follow, so that Christ will come back to a world that is ready to receive Him. Accompanying this heresy is the false teaching that the

church is going to avoid suffering in the great tribulation, and that everything the Bible has to say about a time of severe persecution was fulfilled in AD 70 with the destruction of Jerusalem. The SHC knows nothing of this false and foolish teaching. Christ is going to come again when the world’s cup of iniquity will be full and “the Church laid waste with bloodshed and flames.”

Then Christ will come in judgment. To be sure, He will come to deliver His suffering people. When He comes, He will “come again to claim his own.” When He comes, “the dead will rise again.” When He comes, those who are “alive will be changed.” And then, “all the faithful will be caught up to meet Christ in the air, so that then they may enter with Him into the blessed dwelling-places to live forever.”

But Christ’s coming will also be for judgment: “But the unbelievers and ungodly will descend with the devils into hell to burn forever and never to be redeemed from torments.” Everlasting torments! Where the wicked, both men and angels, die a death that never comes to an end. Where there is weeping and gnashing of teeth. “Where their worm dieth not, and the fire is not quenched” (Mark 9:44).

“Even so, come, Lord Jesus!”



Pillar and ground of truth

Prof. Russell Dykstra, pastor of Byron Center PRC in Byron Center, Michigan

The Protestant Reformed Churches: Their beginnings (4): Common grace in the assemblies

The Christian Reformed Church (CRC) in the 1920s was divided over common grace and its implications. The doctrine of common grace had been developed by Abraham Kuyper and Herman Bavinck in the Netherlands. It came to the CRC through their writings as well as by immigration of ministers and members. Ralph Janssen used it to support his erroneous teaching on Scripture and miracles. And various sectors of the churches were developing the doctrine toward more openness to the culture of America, which at that time was promoting new and higher levels of immorality (the “Roaring Twenties”).

Prior to 1924, the CRC synod had condemned Janssen’s teaching but not addressed his justification for it (namely, common grace). Many ministers expressed concern about the creeping worldliness, but did not con-

nect it with common grace. The only significant public criticism of common grace was coming from Revs. H. Danhof and H. Hoeksema. Herman Hoeksema had begun to critique the doctrine in *The Banner*. Rev. Jan Karel VanBaalen wrote publicly that a denial of common grace was not Reformed but Anabaptist. This ignited a war of publications, with VanBaalen supporting the teaching of common grace, on the one side, and, on the other side, Danhof and Hoeksema condemning it.

How did it happen that common grace came into official ecclesiastical discussions and ultimately ecclesiastical adoption? It came by way of protests against Danhof and Hoeksema. The process is fascinating to study, especially as it evolved so very quickly from public writings to ecclesiastical assemblies and a rush to judgment. But the history, a bit complicated, is available

from other sources, and my goal now is not to give all the details.¹ Rather the main point is to set forth the doctrine and show how it became the official teaching of the CRC.

The protests began in January 1924, when three members of Eastern Ave. Christian Reformed Church brought a protest to the consistory, accusing their minister (H. Hoeksema) of preaching false doctrine. Later it came to light that these men were aided in writing the protest by a brother of one of the protestors, Rev. G. Hoeksema, who had served with H. Hoeksema on the committee that had investigated Janssen, and had voted to approve Janssen's teaching.

A second protest was lodged by another member of Eastern Ave. CRC, Rev. J. VanderMey, a minister who had been appointed financial secretary of Calvin Seminary. His charges were that Hoeksema taught 1) that God was only gracious toward the elect (VanderMey insisted that God loves and is gracious to all men, and used the well-meant offer as proof); 2) that natural man cannot do any good; 3) that Hoeksema makes the second table of the law of no effect, leaving no room for love and fellowship with world. In addition, VanderMey criticized Hoeksema's preaching because there was no earnest invitation or well-meant offer in the preaching and Hoeksema stressed predestination and God's counsel too much.

J.K. VanBaalen also wrote a protest against Hoeksema and Danhof, and filed it with their respective consistory. His charges included the following:

- Hoeksema and Danhof deny that God is gracious to the ungodly reprobate.
- They coordinate election and reprobation.
- They deny the restraint of sin by common grace.
- They teach that natural man can do no good.
- They accused many officebearers in the Christian Reformed Church and in the Netherlands of being un-Reformed.

Having received this protest, the two consistories proposed a face-to-face meeting between VanBaalen and Hoeksema and Danhof. VanBaalen refused and appealed to their respective classes.

The fourth protest/overture came from Rev. M. M.

Schans of the CRC of Kelloggsville. In it he expressed doubt about the orthodoxy of both Hoeksema and Danhof, and asked classis to examine the men on these points:

- The well-meant offer.
- The doctrine of election and reprobation, which, he alleged, they overemphasized.
- The restraint of sin.
- Civic righteousness.
- God's over-ruling providence.

He also asked that classis overture synod to investigate the writings of the men. This was also sent to Classis East, presented in the form of an overture from the consistory of Kelloggsville, though the consistory had voted not to agree with their pastor's request to send it. This also was sent around to various consistories.

Thus to Classis Grand Rapids East, May 21, 1924 came four appeals, the central issues of which were:

- A common grace of God for all, elect and reprobate.
- The well-meant offer of the gospel.
- Objections against an alleged over-emphasis on predestination.
- Maintaining that the natural (unregenerated) man does good.

In addition, Eastern Ave. CRC's consistory sent protests contending that some of the appeals were illegally there. Most of these protests against Hoeksema were sent on to the Synod of 1924.

When Classis Grand Rapids West (the classis to which Danhof belonged) met in May 1924, the protest that VanBaalen had filed against Hoeksema and Danhof was there, against Danhof. Classis decided that Danhof and VanBaalen must sit down and discuss the issues, and if VanBaalen was not satisfied with the views of Danhof, he could notify the consistory of Kalamazoo. If that did not satisfy him, he might call a special meeting of Classis West. VanBaalen called a special meeting of Classis Grand Rapids West, which met on June 10. One can only react with astonishment, not only that a minister (not even of that classis) was allowed to call a special meeting, but also that the classis gave VanBaalen permission to appeal to synod, set to convene eight days later!

The content of these protests indicates that established Reformed doctrines were being questioned by these protestants, including the sovereignty of God in providence. Other doctrines included those clearly established by Dordrecht 1618-19 against the Remonstrants: the total depravity of fallen man; sovereign, unconditional predestination; the rejection of the well-meant offer of the gospel; and sovereign, particular grace. This battle over common grace had serious implications touching on the heart of the gospel set forth in the Reformed Confessions.

¹ The most complete source is *The Protestant Reformed Churches in America: Their Origin, Early History and Doctrine*, by Herman Hoeksema, 2nd edition, published in Grand Rapids, MI in 1947. Another important source is John Bolt, "Common Grace and the Christian Reformed Synod of Kalamazoo (1924): A Seventy-Fifth Anniversary Retrospect," *Calvin Theological Journal*, vol. 35, #1 (April, 2000). Available at the PRCA website: <https://www.prcanet.org/resources/publications/articles/item/324-common-grace-and-the-christian-reformed-synod-of-kalamazoo-1924>.

The CRC Synod convened June 18, 1924, meeting in the First Christian Reformed Church of Kalamazoo (where Danhof was the minister). The 78 delegates (six from each of the thirteen classes) dealt with all the protests from the two classes (Grand Rapids East and West) as well as overtures from four other classes.

The committee assigned to study the protests and bring advice to synod met for almost two weeks, reporting July 1. The committee did not ask Danhof or Hoeksema to meet with them. The committee noted that there were three elements of importance in the matter of common grace, namely, a general grace for all, the restraint of sin, and the good works of the ungodly. But the committee recommended

that synod make no declaration at present concerning the standpoint of the church regarding the doctrine of common grace and also of its ramifications. Such a declaration would assume that this matter had been thought through and had been developed in all its particulars, which certainly is not the case. This necessary prior study is entirely lacking. As a result there is no *communis opinio* [common opinion] in the Reformed churches on this matter.²

That wise advice of the committee was not followed. Rather, the three elements were formulated as three points to be adopted (see appendix). And the CRC Synod of 1924 did indeed adopt the “Three Points of Common Grace.”

Having adopted the Three Points, the synod made other decisions that seem to contradict that adoption. For example, it decided: “At the present to formulate no statement relative to the standpoint of the Church regarding the doctrine of general or common grace in every detail and in all its implications.” And a good reason for that was “dogmas are not made but are born out of the conflict of opinions, and therefore, it is desirable that the establishment of a certain dogma be preceded a lengthy exchange of opinions.” Accordingly, synod urged

the leaders of our people, both ministers and professors, to make further study of the doctrine of Common Grace; that they give themselves account carefully of the problems that present themselves in connection with this matter, in sermons, lectures and publications.³

It is well known that Hoeksema was restricted in his ability to address the synod, though he was the one involved in most of the protests. Danhof was a delegate and did raise objections. In fact, he brought an official protest to the synod after the Three Points were adopt-

ed, and made it plain that he would continue to oppose this doctrine. Hoeksema was only allowed to speak once, which he did for an hour and a half in an evening session. But it was to no avail.

In answering the protests against Hoeksema, the synod turned most away on the ground that the objections against him were based on his preaching, and they had no way of evaluating that. And as to the overtures to evaluate the teaching of Danhof and Hoeksema, the synod adopted the following:

Synod expresses that several statements in the writings of the Reverends H. Danhof and H. Hoeksema cannot very well be harmonized with what Scripture and the Confessions teach us regarding the above-mentioned three points. Synod also judges that the pastors referred to, in their writings use some strong expressions, from which it is evident that in their presentation of the truth they do not sufficiently adhere to the way in which our confessions express themselves, especially Point I of the Utrecht Conclusions.

On the other hand, synod declares that these ministers in their writings, according to their own repeated declarations, do not intend or purpose anything else than to teach and maintain our Reformed doctrine, the doctrine of Scripture and the Confessions; and it cannot be denied that they are Reformed in respect to the fundamental truths as they are formulated in the Confessions even though it be with an inclination to one-sidedness.⁴

And finally, as to the need for condemnation or discipline of Danhof and Hoeksema, the synod passed by proposals of that nature. Rather the synod admonished “the two brethren to abide in their teaching and writing by the standpoint of our Confessions regarding the three points that were discussed.”⁵

Many of these decisions strike one as highly unusual, even contradictory. The rush to adopt common grace, and yet not as the final standpoint of the CRC; the evaluation of the teaching of Danhof and Hoeksema; the warning that common grace can be used to promote worldliness. All things point to a divided synod that was quite unprepared to deal with this. It was a synod that should have heeded the advisory committee’s first advice not to adopt a formulation of common grace.

But, according to God’s determinate counsel, the Synod of 1924 did adopt common grace. And this would lead to the discipline of ministers and consistories who refused to agree with the newly established doctrine.

2 CRC Acts 1924, p 134. Quoted in Bolt, *Retractions*.

3 Hoeksema, *The PRC in America*, 94, 95.

4 Hoeksema, *The PRC in America*, 86.

5 Hoeksema, 86.

The Three Points of Common Grace

(as adopted by the CRC Synod of 1924)

I. The First Point:

Relative to the first point which concerns the favorable attitude of God towards humanity in general and not only towards the elect, Synod declares it to be established according to Scripture and the Confession that, apart from the saving grace of God shown only to those that are elect unto eternal life, there is also a certain favor or grace of God which He shows to His creatures in general. This is evident from the Scriptural passages quoted and from the Canons of Dordrecht II:5 and III-IV:8, 9, which deal with the general offer of the Gospel, while it also appears from the citations made from Reformed writers of the most flourishing period of Reformed Theology that our Reformed writers from the past favored this view.

Scriptural proof: *Psalm 145:9; Matthew 5:44, 45; Luke 6:35-36; Acts 14:16-17; I Timothy 4:10; Romans 2:4; Ezekiel 33:11; Ezekiel 18:23.*

II. The Second Point:

Relative to the second point, which is concerned with the restraint of sin in the life of the individual man and in the community, the Synod declares that there is such a restraint of sin according to Scripture and the Confession. This is evident from the citations from Scripture and from the Netherlands Confession, Articles 13 and 36, which teach that God by the general operations of

His Spirit, without renewing the heart of man, restrains the unimpeded breaking out of sin, by which human life in society remains possible; while it is also evident from the quotations from Reformed writers of the most flourishing period of Reformed Theology, that from ancient times our Reformed fathers were of the same opinion.

Scriptural proof: *Psalm 81:11-12; Genesis 6:3; Acts 7:42; Romans 1:24; Romans 1:26, 28; II Thessalonians 2:6-7.*

III. The Third Point:

Relative to the third point, which is concerned with the question of civil righteousness as performed by the unregenerate, Synod declares that according to Scripture and the Confessions the unregenerate, though incapable of doing any saving good, can do civil good. This is evident from the quotations from Scripture and from the Canons of Dordrecht, III-IV:4, and from the Netherlands Confession, Article 36, which teach that God, without renewing the heart, so influences man that he is able to perform civil good; while it also appears from the citations from Reformed writers of the most flourishing period of Reformed Theology that our Reformed fathers from ancient times were of the same opinion.

Scriptural proof: *II Kings 10:29-30; II Kings 12:2; 14:3; Luke 6:33; Romans 2:14.*



Ministering to the saints

Rev. Daniel Holstege, pastor of the Wingham PRC in Wingham, Ontario, Canada

Focused on Christ in the midst of cancer: Remembering my brother's example

In our life under the sun, there is “a time to every purpose...a time to weep, and a time to laugh, a time to mourn, and a time to dance...a time to get, and a time to lose...” and God “hath made everything beautiful in his time...” (Eccl. 3:1-7).

It is a time to weep when you hear that your beloved brother...your dear son...your cherished husband...your loving father...your faithful friend...has been diagnosed with an aggressive form of cancer...when you see his strength disappear after only a few months of battling against it...when you suddenly find yourself in the hospital, watching him slip farther away with each labored

breath, and you need to say goodbye and let him go, but you do not feel ready...when you wake up the next day and remind yourself that he is really gone...when you are doing a thing you never dreamed you would have to do, carrying the casket of your own brother and watching them lower his body into the grave...and you see tears streaming down the face of your dear bereaved sister-in-law and young nephews and nieces. There were many times to laugh in the past, because he was always the one to make us laugh, and God made that beautiful in its time too. But those times with him are now over, as far as this life is concerned, because God has been

pleased to give us who loved my brother a time to lose and a time to weep...

In preparing to write this article, I was reminded of a passage in the *Confessions* of the great church father, Augustine, in which he wrote concerning a dear friend who was snatched away from this life much too soon by his estimation: "As a boy he had grown up with me, and we had gone to school together and played with one another." Since Augustine was an unbeliever at the time he lost his friend, he did not deal well with his loss and later confessed,

I was in misery, and misery is the state of every soul overcome by friendship with mortal things and lacerated when they are lost.... At that time that was my state: I wept very bitterly and took my rest in bitterness.... What madness not to understand how to love human beings with awareness of the human condition! ...I boiled with anger, sighed, wept.... I found no calmness, no capacity for deliberation. I carried my lacerated and bloody soul when it was unwilling to be carried by me. I found no place where I could put it down.

When he came to know God later in his life, Augustine ruminated on that moment of misery and confessed, "I should have lifted myself to you, Lord, to find a cure. I knew that, but did not wish it or have the strength for it."¹

At the time of that painful loss, Augustine wept as a man who had no hope (I Thess. 4:13). But we who believe in Jesus have "strong consolation, who have fled for refuge to lay hold upon the hope set before us: which hope we have as an anchor of the soul, both sure and steadfast" in the storms of life (Heb. 6:18-19). I have been amazed on more than one occasion at the strong faith and hope of fellow believers who have suffered tragedies in their lives. I have read and heard them testify of the grace of God that held them up and carried them through even the most shocking kinds of trauma to the soul. But like many of you, I suppose, I tended to think of such trauma as the sort of thing that happens to other people. But that thought no longer rises up in my mind, having lost a cousin in a car accident, a dear friend and fellow officebearer in a work accident, and now my own brother to an aggressive form of cancer. The Lord has brought me and all who loved my brother into the company of all you who have lost a loved one much too soon in life, by our reckoning.

What shall I say? I will praise the grace of our God, who brought my brother through a furious storm of cancer to the peaceful shores of eternity in a way that

manifested His great power to sustain the faith of His children in the darkest hours. God made him a hero of faith to me and others, a powerful example of how to die by faith in Christ. I stood at the foot of his bed on the morning of the Sunday before he died and told him that he was setting an example for us of how to suffer by faith. He did not expect me to say that. He was not consciously trying to set an example. But God made him an example because God gave him the faith to cling to Christ with unflinching courage as he came face to face with death at a young age, at what we would consider the middle of a lifetime, 38 years old. He was about to celebrate his fifteenth wedding anniversary and was in the midst of raising four precious children. He had found his vocational place in life in the real estate business and loved to help people find and sell houses. He had been serving his first term on his church's evangelism committee, and another member of the committee told me that the zeal he brought to the work was much appreciated. He was also on the board of the Christian school that his children attend. But then he got sick. And how did he deal with it?

He dealt with it by focusing his thoughts on Christ. The unbeliever who gets terminal cancer has no hope. What can he say? I am a victim of bad luck. I have been dealt a bad hand. Or he might shake his fist toward heaven and air out his grievance to the Lord of all the earth. This is not fair! How can this be happening to me? The unbeliever who is healthy concludes from the looming reality of death, "Let us eat and drink; for tomorrow we die" (Is. 22:13; I Cor. 15:32). We believers are tempted to react in these ways too, and when we are weak with illness, the devil seeks to drown us in a sea of doubts, fears, anger, and despair. But I never saw any of that in my brother. He was, to use his own words, "laser-focused on Christ." As long as he focused on Christ, he said to us one evening, everything went well, everything fell into place. But whenever he focused on his weakening body, how sick he had become, the mountain he would need to climb to get better, it all fell apart and the littlest tasks were hard to accomplish. So by the grace of God, he focused on Christ, the truth of who Christ is, what Christ has done for us, how Christ has made a way through death for us sinners by His sacrifice on the cross and resurrection from the dead, where Christ is now in heaven, how belonging to Christ makes everything good for us in life and death, what it will be like to be with Christ.

We all have a fear of dying, to one degree or another, and if we do not think so, we need only imagine how we would feel if we suddenly heard our doctor tell us that we have stage-four cancer, especially if we are only mid-

1 Augustine, *Confessions*, Oxford World's Classics, trans. Henry Chadwick (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1998), 56-60.

dle aged. We have a deeply ingrained, God-given will to live. We want to live and enjoy the good gifts God has given us in our lives. We do not relish the thought of dying and leaving it all behind. If we say that we do not fear death, what we mean is that we believe with all our heart that death will not be the end for us, but that we will pass through death into eternal life with God because Christ has made a way for us. Yet when we are in the middle of life, when we feel that we have a lot to live for, a loving spouse, little children, an enjoyable career, an important place in the church or school, then we still want to keep living for a long time. Then we can sometimes fear that dreaded diagnosis of a terminal illness that will cut our life short, because we know it happens to some people. If we allow that fear to grow in our souls, it can become a source of anxiety and panic that hinders us from living the life we are called to live by faith in Christ.

What so amazed me about my brother was that I never heard him complain or express fear about the heavy affliction the Lord laid upon him in His sovereign good pleasure. Just the opposite, he expressed excitement about seeing Jesus and the saints who have finished their course before us. At the same time, he did feel a great heaviness about what his death would mean for the woman with whom God had made him one flesh for almost fifteen years and the children God had given them to raise, all of whom he loved so much. He was in a strait betwixt two, like Paul, having a desire to depart and to be with Christ, which is far better than anything in this life, but also feeling that to abide in the flesh was more needful for his family (Phil. 1:23-24). More than anything, his love for them motivated him to use every reserve of strength he had to win the battle against his cancer and have more years to live. He wanted to be there for her and for them, to raise his children to adulthood and see them graduate from school and help them find their way in life. He once mentioned to me the time when Hezekiah was sick unto death, when Isaiah told him to set his house in order, and Hezekiah besought the LORD to remember him, and wept bitterly, and God gave him fifteen more years to live (Is. 38:1-5). My brother believed that God could do a miracle and heal his body too, if He wanted to. But he also accepted the fact that he might

not make it, and he expressed his readiness and eagerness to meet Jesus.

How do I explain that? There is nothing natural about it. It was purely and simply the grace of God working in his heart to *believe*. “For our light affliction, which is but for a moment, worketh for us a far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory; while we look not at the things which are seen, but at the things which are not seen: for the things which are seen are temporal; but the things which are not seen are eternal” (II Cor. 4:17-18). “For whatsoever is born of God overcometh the world: and this is the victory that overcometh the world, even our faith. Who is he that overcometh the world, but he that believeth that Jesus is the Son of God?” (I John 5:4-5).

I went out to Colorado to visit my brother in what turned out to be the last week of his life in his earthly tabernacle. I wanted to provide whatever support I could, especially the spiritual support of reading the Word of God and prayer and talking about spiritual things. Indeed, it was a great blessing to be able to make an extended pastoral visit to my own brother and minister to his soul in a time of great affliction, as anyone who has cared for the sick and dying knows

How do I explain that [faith]? There is nothing natural about it. It was purely and simply the grace of God working in his heart to *believe*. “For our light affliction, which is but for a moment, worketh for us a far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory; while we look not at the things which are seen, but at the things which are not seen: for the things which are seen are temporal; but the things which are not seen are eternal” (II Cor. 4:17-18).

very well. And yet, in the end, God ministered richly to *my* soul through the words *my brother* spoke when he confessed his firm faith in Christ while sitting on a couch in the living room in a body ravaged by cancer and chemotherapy. He looked up to me as his older brother. But now I look up to him, and I will for the rest of my life. I look up to the Lord who worked in his heart that unwavering faith in Christ and that unflinching courage in the face of death. I pray that when the time comes, God will give me the same ability to face death and exit this world with the triumphant shout, “O death, where is thy sting? O grave, where is thy victory? The sting of death is sin; and the strength of sin is the law. But thanks be to God, which giveth us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ” (I Cor. 15:55-57).

I pray that God will use this article to strengthen you too as you fight the good fight of faith and lay hold on eternal life (I Tim. 6:12). May God grant us to keep our eyes of faith on Christ in life and in death.

In loving memory of Nathan Holstege (1985-2023)



Strength of youth

Rev. Ryan Barnhill, pastor of Heritage PRC in Sioux Falls, South Dakota

Battling the devil (6) Praying in the war

Previous article in this series: October 1, 2023, p. 15.

Take a look at the battlefield. Over yonder you will see Christian soldiers. They are knelt down on the bloody field of war, hands folded, eyes tightly shut, faces strained with concentration, lips moving. Satan's arrows are flying, his evil hosts advancing, the heat of battle intensifying—yet, these soldiers remain on their knees.

Praying—a key element in the warfare.

Young soldier, are you daily on your knees?

So important a place does prayer have in spiritual warfare, that you can understand the verses we have previously considered in this series to read this way: “Stand therefore, having your loins girt about with truth (*while praying*), and having on the breastplate of righteousness (*while praying*); and your feet shod with the preparation of the gospel of peace (*while praying*); above all, taking the shield of faith, wherewith ye shall be able to quench all the fiery darts of the wicked (*while praying*). And take the helmet of salvation (*while praying*), and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God (*while praying*)....” Prayer is not another piece of armor, but it is an activity that weaves itself through every aspect of the battle.

Christian soldiers praying

Ephesians 6:18 is about prayer. Prayer is communication or conversation with God. God is our Friend-Sovereign, and we are His friend-servants. In friendship, there is communication. Our prayers are an expression of that covenant life God lives with us and that we live with Him. This immediately reminds us of how intimate, warm, and beautiful prayer is. That we have any right to pray is amazing. Apart from Christ, we have no right to approach our heavenly Father; only in Christ may we speak to God. That we have the ability to engage in this communication is also wonderful, for it means that the Spirit of Christ has made us alive and continuously operates in us so that we have the desire and strength to pray. Ephesians 6:18 uses two different words for prayer. First, “praying”/“prayer” is the most general word for prayer, and includes all of prayer's elements.

Second, “supplication” refers to what we ask of God when we come to Him.

Ephesians 6:18 is about *warfare* prayer. The preceding context deals with spiritual warfare, and so verse 18 is not *general* teaching on prayer, but about the prayers of *Christian soldiers*. What prayers do soldiers make in the heat of battle? We adore God who is the source of all the armor that we need in the fight. We confess to God our sins of having fallen on the battlefield, that is, the times we fell to the temptations of the Devil. We thank God for the victorious Commander-in-Chief, Jesus Christ, in whom we have the victory. But especially do we make supplication or petition—that receives the emphasis. The fact that we make supplications on the battlefield expresses how much we depend upon and need the Lord. We petition God to strengthen us to stand in the warfare (Eph. 6:11, 13), to hold our ground and resist the foe. We ask God to lead us not into temptation, but to deliver us from evil. We make such requests not only for ourselves, but also for our fellow soldiers (“watching thereunto with all perseverance and supplication *for all saints*”)—the elect, redeemed, and Holy Spirit-indwelt men and women, boys and girls, in the trenches beside us.

Christian soldiers praying urgently

These wartime prayers are urgent. This urgency in prayer is implied in the words “watching thereunto.” First, to watch is to keep on the alert or be at the ready—sleeplessly, even! This watching is done with perseverance, which means a steadfastness in watching. No soldier should be caught sleeping on duty, and neither should you! This idea of steadfast watching can be woven through Ephesians 6:14-17, as it is an activity that applies to all of the warfare. Second, whom we watch is ourselves, but also “all saints” (fellow soldiers). That leads to a question: young people, how well do you know the saints around you? Do you immediately run off after the church service to get home or hang out with friends, or do you take time to talk on a spiritual level with people in the narthex? How about your friends—is the talk only ever about college football or the latest drama on social media, or do you take

time to have serious discussions about your struggles, temptations, needs, and warfare? Third, the goal of our watching is that we might pray for these fellow saints or soldiers; that is, knowing their struggles, temptations, needs, and warfare, we can then *pray knowledgeably* for them. Watch with a view to praying! The urgency of prayer is that these fellow soldiers are saints—made holy by the Holy Spirit—and therefore the *unholy* Satan and his hosts target them. Pray for the saints!

Additionally, the urgency of prayer is found in the word “always”: “Praying *always* with all prayer and supplication in the Spirit....” Christians, we pray in every season because, after all, the Devil never ceases to assault us and the warfare does not stop. Can it be said of you, reader, that your prayer life spans every season?

There is a season in every soldier’s life called the “evil day” (Eph. 6:13). Although spiritual battle fills every day that we live, the “evil day” is a day or season in which the foes attack most vehemently. Friends have extended you the invite to party on Friday night—everyone will be there, they tell you, and the alcohol will be aplenty. The invitation weighs on you—your social standing is at stake. Evil day! Pray! You know that playing high school basketball requires a certain GPA. You also know that the big test on your desk will either make or break that GPA. You did not study, but you know your neighbor did. Will you look at his test? Will you not? Evil day! Pray! But then, too, be in communication with your heavenly Father in the non-evil-day seasons as well—even when the attacks are fewer, the warfare is cooler, keep on praying. Regular, habitual prayer on the field of battle...do you hear the urgency in that?

Furthermore, the urgency of prayer is located in the three “all’s”: “Praying always with *all* prayer and supplication in the Spirit, and watching thereunto with *all* perseverance and supplication for *all* saints.” Imagine soldiers standing in a line, and their commander walking past them, his voice booming with authority: “You must give it your all! No half-heartedness, soldiers!” Like that, Jesus Christ, our Commander-in-Chief, essentially says to us Christian soldiers in these three “all’s,” “Give *everything* in this warfare! No half-heartedness!” The first is *all* prayer. Be praying with all the elements of prayer, all the time, and in all settings. The second is *all* perseverance. We already learned that we must with perseverance or steadfastness watch our fellow saints with a view

to praying for them. The Holy Spirit intensifies that: not only watching, and not even simply watching with perseverance, but watching with *all* perseverance! The third is *all* saints. Watch the saints in your household, in your school, in your congregation, in the Protestant Reformed Churches, in the sisters and contacts of the Protestant Reformed Churches, and in the church catholic. Pray for saints you know by name and face, and for those whom you have never met. Pray for saints you easily love, and for those you struggle to love. Do not allow your prayers to become narrow. Pray specifically, but also broadly.

Christian soldiers praying in the Spirit

These urgent prayers, we make in the Spirit: “Praying always with all prayer and supplication *in the Spirit*....”

Praying in the Spirit is to pray empowered by the Spirit. Of ourselves, we cannot pray on the battlefield. We must not look to ourselves for the strength to pray,

seeking to stir up some inward resolve or determination to do it. The Spirit is our strength to pray. He, the Spirit of Jesus Christ, is the mighty Spirit who empowers us to be praying soldiers, even as the arrows fly and the swords clang. What an encouragement that is—

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for this prayer life, you are strengthened!

Also, praying in the Spirit is to pray according to the Word of God. If you recall, the last article in this series was about the sword of the Spirit, which is the Word of God (Eph. 6:17b). We made the point that the sword, the Word of God, has its source in the Spirit, especially the Spirit’s work of inspiration. That thought should be carried over into verse 18, which refers to praying *in the Spirit*, meaning: praying according to those Scriptures the Spirit Himself inspired. What exactly should we be praying in the warfare? What should our supplications be? Scripture will tell you not only what such prayers should include, but Scripture will also provide the very content of those prayers. But especially, the Spirit, who is the Spirit of *Christ* and always shines the spotlight on Him, guides us to see the teaching in Scripture that we must always pray in Jesus’ name, for whose sake our prayers are heard and our supplications answered.

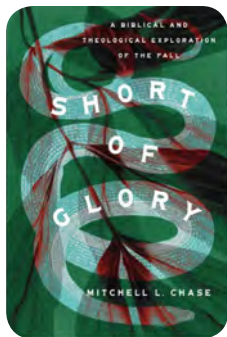
Our series on battling the Devil now comes to a close. Go forth, Christian soldier! Christ, the Commander, is your strength. Go forth in the consciousness of the victory He has accomplished at Calvary. Go forth watching and praying, in the power of God.



Bring the books...

Mr. Charles Terpstra, member of Faith PRC in Jenison, Michigan and full-time librarian/registrar/archivist at the Protestant Reformed Theological Seminary and SB book review editor

The following book is reviewed by Prof. David J. Engelsma, former editor of the *Standard Bearer*, professor emeritus of Dogmatics and Old Testament in the Protestant Reformed Theological Seminary, and member of Trinity PRC in Hudsonville, Michigan.



Short of Glory: A Biblical and Theological Exploration of the Fall, by Mitchell L. Chase. Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2023. Pp. xii + 213. \$17.99. Softcover. ISBN: 9781433585098.

The sub-title accurately describes the content and appeal of the book: “A Biblical and Theological Exploration of the Fall.” In language readily understood by the layman, the book calls attention to and explains every aspect of the account of the Fall in Genesis 3. This “exploration” consists of thirteen relatively short chapters from chapter 1 on “Sacred Space,” to chapter 13 on “East of Eden.” In between are chapters on “Two Trees,” “That Ancient Serpent,” “A Broken Covenant,” “The Mother of All Living” and more.

The message is orthodox, viewing Genesis 3 as history. Such is the author’s treatment of his subject that it is clear that if Genesis 3 is not history, all of the rest of history as recorded in the Bible, culminating in the coming of Jesus Christ, is meaningless at best and a wicked deception at worst. Apart from the historical Fall, there was no sense in a coming of Jesus in His incarnation and suffering.

With regard to the specific aspects of the Fall, Chase is generally sound. As created by God, Adam’s relationship to God was a covenant, and this covenant was not a contract, but a relationship of friendship. “Adam and Eve knew God as Yahweh. They were in fellowship with the Creator of all things. He had formed them and befriended them. He dwelt with them in a covenant relationship” (81). This conception of the covenant causes the author to be less than enthusiastic about the traditional doctrine of a “covenant of works.”

The explanation of the main features of the account of the Fall is rich. It is the purpose of the book to relate the Fall of Genesis 3 to all the rest of the theology of the Christian faith, culminating in the coming of Jesus

Christ and the glorification in Him of the saints. This is the profound reality of the Fall as announced in the promise of the Seed of the woman in Genesis 3:15. And this is the reality of the Fall because of the sovereignty of God: “God’s plan incorporated the fall” (192). God’s purpose was to display a glory that exceeds the glory of God in Adam the first.

Explanation of certain aspects of the Genesis account of the Fall is unusual, but always compelling. For instance, the judgment upon the woman includes barrenness and miscarriages, as well as the bearing and rearing of children who show themselves foolish. The sorrows of marriage for the female are not exclusively the physical pains of pregnancy and childbirth.

Chase cuts the knot of the difficulty of the second part of Genesis 3:16, the judgment on marital relations, by offering a different and defensible translation of the text: “your desire shall be contrary to your husband, but he shall rule over you” (132-135). Marriage is naturally conflict between a male who rules for his own sake and a female who resists his rule.

The description of the garden of Eden as “sacred space” and the pursuit of this theme throughout Scripture are instructive.

The book’s explanation/exploration of the naming of Eve, which means “life,” or “living,” by Adam is moving. The naming was not a “leap in the dark.” Rather, it expressed hope springing from Adam’s faith in the promise of God in Genesis 3:15, that Eve would bring forth, millennia later, the Seed who would crush the head of the serpent.

Adam and Eve came short of the glory of God. This was their sin. Their sin affected all of the human race, Jesus only excepted, and all of human history. But in the grace of the providence of God, it did so according to the purpose of God that believers exceed the enjoyment of Adamic glory in the sharing of the surpassing glory of God in Jesus Christ.

This is an edifying and thoroughly enjoyable book on a fundamental of the Christian faith. It is written for the Christian layman, although no minister will read it

without profit. It is a good book to place in the hands of the student at a Christian college where, contrary to its claim to be Christian, denial of the historicity of Gen-

esis 3 holds sway, with the justification, when pressed, that the matter is not that important anyhow.

Announcements

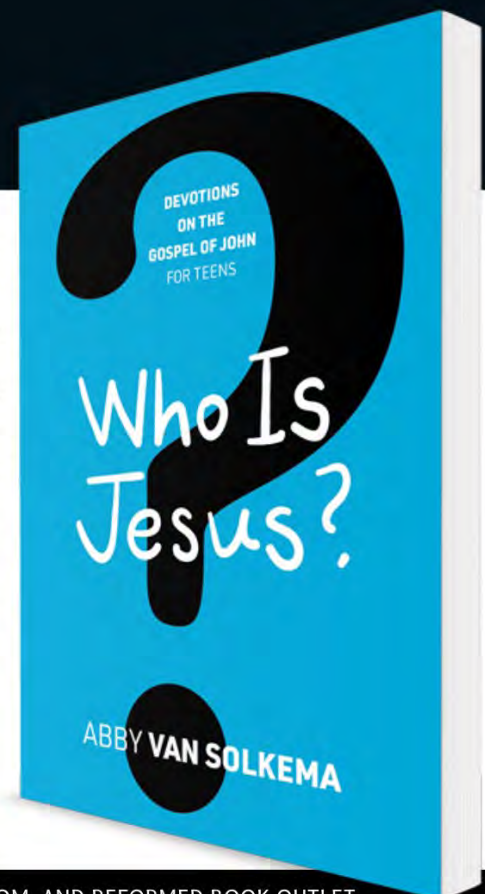
Resolution of sympathy

The Council and congregation of Loveland PRC of Loveland, Colorado expresses Christian sympathy to Sarah Holstege and her children Ella, Wyatt, Willa, and Harrison in the death of their beloved husband and father, **Nate Holstege**, who was taken to his heavenly home on October 19, 2023. We also express our Christian sympathy to the extended family, Glen and Twyla Griess (parents-in-law to Nate) and sisters and brothers-in-law, Kelsey and Ashley VanBommel and family, Jason and Jessica Scritchfield and family. May we all find comfort in the words of Jesus from John 11:25, 26: "Jesus said unto her, I am the resurrection, and the life: he that believeth in me, though he were dead, yet shall he live: And whosoever liveth and believeth in me shall never die."

Robert Brands, Vice-president,
Joel Moore, Clerk

NEW RELEASE

This Christmas season,
order *Who is Jesus?*
*Devotions on the
Gospel of John*, for all
the **teens and young
adults** in your life!



AVAILABLE AT RPA.ORG, AMAZON.COM, AND REFORMED BOOK OUTLET

Classis East

Classis East will meet in regular session on Wednesday, January 10, 2024, at 8:00 A.M., in the Hope Protestant Reformed Church, Walker, MI. Material for this session must be in the hands of the stated clerk by December 12, 2023.

Rev. C. Spronk, Stated Clerk